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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/16/2017
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PINR](#) [APER](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: FORMER EMBASSY EMPLOYEE REQUESTS REFUGEE STATUS;
CLAIM NOT CREDIBLE

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns.
Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

[1](#)1. (C) This is an action request. See paragraph 12.

[1](#)2. (C) SUMMARY: Freelance journalists Marina Kalashnikova, who was fired by the Embassy in 2000, and her husband Viktor Kalashnikov (a former Russian intelligence officer) have requested refugee status or other USG assistance in leaving Russia, claiming that they are being persecuted for writing critically about the government. Tying these persecution claims to her previous employment at the U.S. Embassy, they have repeatedly claimed that all their other avenues of departure from Russia have been blocked by misinformation passed by the U.S. to other Western governments.

[1](#)3. (C) Because of the difficult climate that journalists face in Russia, the Embassy has made a considerable effort to look into this case. Embassy officers, including the Political Minister-Counselor and Refugee Coordinator, have met four times with the Kalashnikovs and the Refugee Coordinator has conducted a thorough review of her claims. Having reviewed Kalashnikova's employment record with the Embassy and her journalistic credentials and those of her husband, we do not believe their claims of persecution are credible enough to warrant referral to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. Rather, the Kalashnikovs now appear to be seeking refugee status as part of a long-running effort to have the U.S. government "atone" for her termination and to improve their economic situation. Their claims are becoming increasingly overdramatic. We request Department concurrence that we inform the Kalashnikovs that the U.S. cannot provide any assistance to them. The Kalashnikovs may respond to our rebuff by seeking to publish derogatory, wildly inaccurate accounts of their interaction with the Embassy, as they have done in the past. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND

[1](#)4. (C) Marina Kalashnikova was employed by the Embassy as a locally engaged Information Specialist in the Public Affairs Section from May 12, 1998 to March 3, 2000. According to a memo in her personnel file, she was terminated for unsatisfactory performance, including creating tensions among staff in the section in part through wild conspiracy theories, failing to understand her work requirements, and continuing her employment at the USA-Canada Institute while simultaneously working at the Embassy. Her two-inch thick file also documents unexplained absences, rude and aggressive behavior to other members of the staff, and failure to carry out her responsibilities. It also contains letters from her seeking reinstatement, asking for Embassy assistance to obtain a passport two years after her termination, an inquiry from the MFA she instigated about reasons for her dismissal, and threats to sue the U.S. government in Russian courts, as well as articles she published about her treatment by the Embassy.

15. (C) Kalashnikova subsequently worked for other media outlets, including the newspapers Kommersant, Russkiy Kuryer, and Nezavisimaya Gazeta, from where she was fired, she claimed, at the behest of Russian officials for writing negative stories about them. She has continued to periodically publish freelance articles but claimed it is impossible to find permanent employment because of interference by Russian authorities.

16. (C) Her husband, Viktor Kalashnikov, worked as an intelligence officer in the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) from 1985 to 1992. He later became a journalist for the ORT television channel and claims that he was fired because of his liberal, pro-Western views. He also worked freelance for other media outlets. Kalashnikov claimed that he had approached several Western intelligence services, including that of the U.S., offering to work for them after leaving the SVR. Like his wife, Kalashnikov maintains that Russian authorities have blocked his efforts to find full-time employment.

FAST FORWARD

17. (C) In June 2006, the Irish Ambassador passed a letter from the Kalashnikovs in which the two sought contacts with senior U.S. officials over purported threats against them and mistreatment by the Embassy. The two asked for assistance in emigrating to the U.S. and finding employment there. After reviewing the letter and other information available at post, REFCOORD responded to their request in a letter that noted they were not being considered for refugee status. The Kalashnikovs persisted in seeking meetings with representatives from the Embassy, including the Ambassador, alleging that REFCOORD's letter had added to the danger they

faced since Russian intelligence services believed that the couple was attempting to tarnish Russia's reputation abroad.

18. (C) On four occasions in 2007 -- March 27, April 4, April 19, and May 3 -- Emboffs have met with the Kalashnikovs to discuss their situation and further assess any persecution claim they might have. The Kalashnikovs told us that Russian intelligence services were orchestrating a campaign to discredit them and that they believed they were in danger. They claim this is a result of arose from their favorable orientation toward the West, their criticism of the GOR, and alleged intelligence service retribution for Kalashnikov's unwillingness to rejoin them. They described various provocations or incidents of thinly veiled or explicit threats, occurring not only in Russia but during their travels abroad in Germany, the UK, Ireland, Poland, the Baltics, and the U.S. Kalashnikova alleged that Russian intelligence services had been involved in the death of her elderly mother "as a message" and that she feared going to the hairdresser because the stylist may "slit my throat." Following the poisoning of Aleksandr Litvinenko, Kalashnikov published an op-ed piece in a Russian weekly news magazine drawing parallels between himself and Litvinenko. Privately, Kalashnikov told us he believed he was the target of a poisoning in 1997. He provided few details in describing this incident, other than to say he fell ill for a few hours on a train from Brussels to Amsterdam after a visit to the Russian Embassy in Brussels as part of a NATO study tour. He said he did not seek medical attention because he did not want to be dropped from the tour.

19. (C) The Kalashnikovs attribute their inability to obtain employment with news outlets or think tanks outside of Russia to Kalashnikova's firing from the Embassy and information allegedly spread by the USG that they are a security risk. Kalashnikov claimed that the couple have been told repeatedly by contacts in Europe who offered to help them on the condition that they "have to settle things with the Americans. Everything passes through them." Kalashnikov also said that his approaches to several Western intelligence services offering information were rebuffed after initial interest, with allusions to information obtained from U.S.

intelligence. In a meeting with REFCOORD on May 3, Kalashnikov asked that the USG "rehabilitate" Kalashnikova and try to arrange some employment for them in a third country if they cannot be resettled to the U.S.

¶10. (C) Beyond seeking meetings with Emboffs in Moscow, the Kalashnikovs have also approached our embassies in London and in Dublin during recent trips there, maintaining their claims of persecution and complaining that Embassy Moscow was unfairly discriminating against them. On several occasions, Kalashnikova has continued to misrepresent herself as an Embassy employee, handing out business cards from her previous employment, including as part of her application for a visa for the UK. When queried by UK officials about her, the Embassy informed the British of her true status, resulting in the February 2007 cancellation of her UK visa.

REPUTATION AS JOURNALISTS

¶11. (C) We have devoted considerable time and effort to meet the Kalashnikovs and hear their claims because of the difficult climate for many Russian journalists. We have found nothing that would substantiate their claims. Journalistic contacts in Moscow have told us that Kalashnikova has a reputation for being abrasive and difficult to the point that she is unemployable. The Kalashnikovs said that their appeal to the Glasnost Defense Foundation, a highly regarded defender of press freedom, brought no assistance, further suggesting to us that they and their claims have little credibility. Our assessment is that the couple's articles have been straightforward reporting, neither overly critical of Russia or unwaiveringly supportive of the West. The most critical article that Kalashnikova has written recently is a commentary on the medical care she received during a recent trip to Ireland.

COMMENT AND ACTION REQUEST

¶12. (C) Upon careful examination, we have found no evidence to substantiate the Kalashnikovs' claims. Rather, their conspiratorial nature appears consistent with the sometimes bizarre behavior displayed while Kalashnikova was employed at the Embassy. With Department concurrence, we intend to convey to the Kalashnikovs that we cannot refer them to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and intend to stop any further contact with them. In doing so, we expect the Kalashnikovs to persist in pursuing this issue, perhaps through seeking to publish sensational, critical articles about their treatment and/or approaching other U.S. missions

or the Department, either in person or via e-mail. We request Department concurrence with this approach soonest.
BURNS